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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KUWAIT 000180

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SUBJECT: NEA A/S BURNS'S MEETING WITH FM, JANUARY 14

Classified By: CDA Frank Urbancic for reasons 1.4 b,d

11. (C) SUMMARY: NEA Assistant Secretary Burns met with Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Dr. Mohammed Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah on the evening of 14 January 2003. In a wide-ranging discussion, the Minister expressed great satisfaction about developments in Iraq but insisted that any final decisions must wait until a legitimate Iraqi Government is formed. He called for a speedy clarification of the AIK fuel issue. END SUMMARY

12. (C) Dr. Mohammed began the discussion by mentioning that he had recently attended the Sanaa Inter-Governmental Regional Conference on Democracy, Human Rights and the Role of the International Criminal Court. He noted that the absence of the US at the conference was conspicuous. A/S Burns remarked that he did not believe that the US had been invited to the regional conference and added that the US definitely encourages these types of events. A/S Burns insisted that the region must help address the problems in Yemen as he noted the marked contrast between the city of Sanaa and the tribal areas where the Yemeni Government has little control. He explained that one of the biggest challenges for President Saleh is that Yemeni security problems cannot be disconnected from the economic problems. Dr. Mohammed stated that while the recent GCC summit reconfirmed members' commitment to work with Yemen, there was no way that Yemen would be accepted as a member. He jokingly mentioned that Iraq is considered a more acceptable candidate for membership. (COMMENT: The way he said it did not/not suggest Iraq stood any chance either. END COMMENT).

Thanking Kuwait

13. (C) A/S Burns then explained that the main purpose of the meeting was to convey the enormous appreciation the US has for Kuwait and to highlight the importance of the US-Kuwaiti relationship. He mentioned that Iraq would not be free if it were not for the efforts of Kuwait. A/S Burns explained that the meeting represented an excellent opportunity to consult on Iraqi developments but that other bilateral issues should also be dealt with.

French Interests

14. (C) Dr. Mohammed stated that he had just hosted French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin, who had raised the need for an international conference on Iraq. The French, according to Dr. Mohammed, thought that the US should be gradually transferring power to the Iraqis before the 30 June official transition of authority. A/S Burns responded that the USG is very serious about the transition process and thought that the French proposal was a false argument. He explained that the US is transferring power now and offered the example that many Iraqi ministers have much more power today than even a few months ago. He intimated, however, that there must be a military coalition presence in Iraq for some time to come. (NOTE: Dr. Mohammed was clearly not supportive of the French proposal. END NOTE)

15. (C) A/S Burns said that a big conference on Iraq was not necessary. What is more important, he relayed to Dr. Mohammed, are building-blocks of support such as the Madrid Donors' conference, a regional neighbors' conference, and possibly another UN resolution, at an appropriate point, to codify solid international support.

16. (C) The French Foreign Minister had also told Dr. Mohammed that there is a need to re-engineer the security structure in the Gulf; that the threat from Saddam, Iran, and Syria is gone and there should be new ideas of what the international community should do to make the region more stable. Dr. Mohammed said that what the French had in mind was UNSCR 598, Article 8 and that De Villepin wanted to find a way to inject French ideas into the region. Dr. Mohammed asked if this was something new or if the French were just trying to annoy the US, as he had not heard these views before. Burns remarked that he had heard similarly vague talk about regional security restructuring from the French and stated that the issue has been discussed ever since the liberation of Kuwait. He said that what is essential is GCC security interests and what GCC members can do to help create a stable security

structure in the Gulf.

Wait For Sovereign Government

17. (C) Dr. Mohammed said the recent GCC summit covered relatively little political ground and focused primarily on educational reform. He had found it very refreshing to focus on more social policy issues. He stressed the need to withhold any security or political judgments until a legitimate Iraqi Government is formed. He remarked that Kuwait does not want to change anything and is content with the security arrangement that exists. He then expressed his appreciation for the November 15 Agreement establishing a timetable for transferring sovereignty to the Iraqi people. He said this was something to be applauded and shared that there is much optimism for the plan.

18. (C) Dr. Mohammed asked about the issue of federalism in Iraq. He said that while it means many things to many people, he had noticed that the Turks expressed some concern over it. He intimated that Kuwait is just trying to anticipate the contentious issues. A/S Burns assured Dr. Mohammed that the US will discuss this issue with Kuwait in more detail after the Turkish Prime Minister's upcoming visit to Washington. Kuwaiti Ambassador to Washington Salem Al-Sabah said he would follow up with NEA.

19. (C) A/S Burns stated that the transitional administrative law is not meant to be the final word and that time was needed to prepare a permanent constitution. He emphasized the importance of a formula that reinforces stability and Iraq's unity. Burns remarked that he is impressed by the general commitment by the Kurds, the Shia, and the Sunni Arabs to supporting Iraq's unified future.

10. (C) Dr. Mohammed criticized recent statements from INC official Mudhar Shawkat who called for Kuwait to allow Iraq to lease the islands of Warbah and Bubiyan for use as seaports. The Foreign Minister remarked that it was not the time to be confronting these issues, that such statements were not advisable, and that the region must wait for a legitimate Iraqi Government. On the issue of debt, Burns noted to the Foreign Minister that James Baker would be coming to Kuwait soon and that the US considers debt reduction to be extremely important to the stable future we both seek for Iraq.

The Sistani Factor

11. (C) Dr. Mohammed candidly asked whether the US considers Iran a source of concern. Burns replied that it is a concern, but that the Iranians have apparently not made up their minds what to do with a new Iraq. The Kuwaiti Minister agreed, stating that the Iranians do not see emerging in Iraq anything they are absolutely against, and that they cannot seem to galvanize their people against the US. He remarked that many recently contentious issues, such as the call for an Islamic state in Iraq, and Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani's calls for elections have quieted down. As for Kuwait, Dr. Mohammed said he is "delighted to have the United States as a neighbor."

12. (C) A/S Burns remarked that Sistani has not wanted to meet with US officials and asked Dr. Mohammed if he had any thoughts on Sistani's role and his approach to the political process in Iraq. Dr. Mohammed, offering his personal view, said he was perplexed about Sistani's call for elections because "it doesn't jibe with his record of staying above the fray." He speculated that Sistani is being pressured to take this position and that maybe he is trying to carve out a role for himself in the new Iraq. Dr. Mohammed opined that Sistani would not remain aloof from the political situation there but that his recent statements reduce him from a religious figure to merely another political entity.

Syria

13. (C) The Minister claimed that remnants of the Iraqi Baath party were trying to establish themselves in Syria. A/S Burns inquired about the Syrian view of the region. Dr. Mohammed stated that the Syrians are not happy with the Syria Accountability Act and they expressed surprise when the Kuwaitis did not raise the issue with them in recent meetings---in keeping with the perception that the Kuwaitis do the bidding of the US in the region. The Syrian Baath party, he pointed out, is beginning to strike out some Baathist rhetoric "indicating that change might translate to Syria also." He told Burns that the Syrian political situation did appear to be changing and related the story of Kuwaiti hunters who had obtained personal permission to hunt there from the Syrian Minister of Defense. Syrian Interior Ministry officials, who apparently did not respect the

signature of the Defense Minister, apprehended the hunters and tore up their hunting permits.

Bilateral Issues -----

14. (C) Moving to bilateral issues, Burns stated that the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) would soon be signed; this was another way the US could help Kuwait more in the direction of economic modernization and reform. On the issue of Trafficking in Persons he pointed out that the Embassy was working with the Government of Kuwait (GOK) on ideas to ensure that Kuwait as a society is pointed in a healthy direction. He also mentioned the importance of Article 98, the necessity for a secure border, and US support for compensation claims in the UN Security Council. Burns also shared that an announcement was forthcoming on Kuwait's status as a Major Non-NATO Ally and that the US would consult with Kuwait on how best to publicize it as a means of highlighting the significance we attach to our relationship.

15. (C) Dr. Mohammed expressed concern that the Minister of Finance was under attack in the Parliament over his running of the ministry and emphasized that he needs a clear commitment and a working agreement on AIK to keep it from becoming an issue in the Parliament. He specifically needs to know how much fuel is needed and for how long it will be required. Burns explained that the US looks forward to working through this issue and assured Dr. Mohammed that the US understands the GOK need for predictability.

16. (C) Dr. Mohammed, in closing, mentioned that Kuwait looks forward to signing the TIFA and proudly announced that foreign banks and investment institutions can now open business in Kuwait. He then shared that he intends to travel to the US sometime in April or May.

17. (U) Baghdad minimize considered.

18. (U) Assistant Secretary Burns has cleared this message.

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